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SENSITIVE

TS#185899

CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
OFFICE OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES

27 November 1965

MEMORANDUM FOR THE DIRECTOR

SUBJECT: Probable Reactions of the DRV, Communist China, and the USSR to US air attacks on petroleum storage facilities in North Vietnam, at the rate of approximately two attacks per week.

1. The proposed US course of action would represent a conspicuous change in the ground rules which the US has hitherto observed in prosecuting the war in Vietnam. Most of the eight principal remaining POL targets are in an area to which the US has accorded special status -- a matter almost certainly understood by the Communists. Assuming that all the specified targets were attacked we do not believe that the order in which the attacks were made, or the manner in which they were grouped over four weeks or so, would significantly affect Communist reaction. The two most important installations are in Haiphong and near Hanoi. Between them these two account for some seventy

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SENSITIVE

percent of North Vietnam's remaining bulk POL storage capacity, and they are of course in the heart of the special area. The chances are that the US attack would inflict considerably larger numbers of civilian casualties than have yet been produced by US air attacks. Moreover, the whole area is heavily defended with AAA, SAM, and fighter aircraft, and operations to suppress anti-aircraft defenses and attacks on airfields might increase such casualties.

2. Thus, the Communists would unquestionably regard the proposed US attacks as opening a new stage in the war, and as a signal of US intention to escalate the scale of conflict. Faced with this development, it is possible that there would be some dissension among the Communist partners as to the proper reaction. We do not believe, however, that the attacks in themselves would lead to a major change of policy on the Communist side, either toward negotiations or toward enlarging the war with major Chinese Communist participation.

3. Hanoi would not be greatly surprised by the attacks. Indeed, to the extent its resources permit, it has already taken steps to reduce their impact. It has developed some underground storage facilities, and some capacity for dispersed storage in drums. It has also taken fairly extensive civil defense measures.

- 2 -

T-O-P S-E-C-R-E-T
SENSITIVE

T-O-P S-E-C-R-E-T
SENSITIVE

It would ask its Communist partners to replace the POL losses as far as possible and to supply drums and trucks to provide less vulnerable storage and movement. We believe that the DRV is prepared to accept for some time at least the strains and difficulties which loss of the major POL facilities would mean for its military and economic activity. It is unlikely that this loss would cripple the Communist military operations in the South, though it would certainly embarrass them. The Viet Cong has the capability to increase the number and scope of sabotage and terrorist operations in South Vietnam by way of retaliation.

4. It is possible that Hanoi would request Chinese fighters, operating from Chinese bases, to help defend the northern DRV, but we consider it unlikely that such fighters would be forthcoming. The Chinese air force is ill-equipped to engage in sustained combat with US air forces, and is unlikely to seek such a contest. As for the sending of large numbers of Chinese ground forces into North Vietnam, we do not think that the DRV would request, or the Chinese volunteer, such action. Nevertheless, the Chinese probably would provide additional military units to assist in coping with problems of supply and communication raised by the US attack. The Chinese would almost certainly urge Hanoi to continue and intensify the general struggle.


- 3 -

T-O-P S-E-C-R-E-T
SENSITIVE

T-O-P S-E-C-R-E-T
SENSITIVE

5. The Soviets would find their difficulties and frustrations increased by the postulated US course of action. They are committed to provide defense for North Vietnam, and (assuming the success of the US attacks) their inability to do so effectively would be dramatized. They would be concerned at the prospect of yet further increases in the US bombing program. They would almost certainly feel obliged to make a further effort, not only to improve these defenses but also to make up for the loss of POL and POL storage facilities. We believe that they would not change their basic policy of avoiding overt involvement in combat while giving extensive military equipment and economic assistance to North Vietnam. But their relations with the US would almost certainly deteriorate, for it is the US bombing of North Vietnam which is, for Moscow, the most nearly intolerable aspect of the conflict.

FOR THE BOARD OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES:


for SHERMAN KENT
Chairman

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- 4 -

T-O-P S-E-C-R-E-T
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